The book concludes with reflections on the significance of El Comité-MINP in the 1970s and how the politics of their youth shaped the lives of its members. What I hope to convey above all is that El Comité achieved its greatest success when it stayed close to the people it meant to serve, and that dedicated, politically active individuals achieved meaningful social change and spread counterhegemonic ideas that nurtured collective action for social justice.

2

Operation Move-In and the Making of a Political Movement

"We had just come out of the park. It was a hot summer day, and we wanted to drink a beer," recalled Pedro Rentas, a retired Teamsters Union activist who lives in Puerto Rico.[1] On a June afternoon in 1970, a group of young men in their early twenties, all Puerto Rican except for one Dominican, gathered to play softball at a Central Park sandlot in Manhattan's Upper West Side. They left the field thirsty and began calling on neighborhood residents to chip in for their beer money. "Someone started with, 'Hey, I got a dollar.' Here's two, then three. We started horsing around, and people from the windows started throwing us money. Before you knew it, we had almost $100!"

In the summer of 1970 the Upper West Side of Manhattan was a densely populated, ethnically diverse, predominantly working-class area. Russian, Polish, Irish, and Italian ethnics and African Americans lived in close proximity to the newest arrivals—Puerto Ricans, who had fled growing unemployment in Puerto Rico a decade or two earlier, and, in lesser numbers, Dominicans who had left the Dominican Republic following the U.S. military invasion in 1965 and subsequent liberalization of U.S. immigration policy.[2] On the western border of the Upper West Side, along West End Avenue and sparsely interspersed within the two-square-mile neighborhood, more affluent newcomers (mainly professionals) had been lured to the area by investment incentives offered by New York City's Department of Real Estate.[3] In the throes of summer's heat, with little air conditioning and no elevators in the five- and six-story tenements, neighborhood residents leaned out of their windows or relaxed on stoops while children played on sidewalks and under the fire hydrants.

Rentas continued:

> We felt like this was too much money. At that time a beer cost us a quarter. So we stopped the ice cream truck and bought ice cream for all the kids. It was marvelous, right? I mean, everybody just came down. We must have bought something like eighty or ninety ice creams that day. And everybody had a great time. . . . So we did it again the following week.

The ballplayers were excited and inspired by the satisfaction they felt in this one small, collective act. They decided to do something more, as Rentas explained:

> We cleaned up this little basketball court in the lot. Some guy loaned us a movie, we borrowed a projector, and someone gave us light. On Friday night, everybody came down to see the movie, even the Gringos. You know, at the corner it was Puerto Ricans, but further up it was middle-class Gringos. They came down, and they really enjoyed it.

In the prior decade, territorial gang fights had plagued the area. According to Luis Ithier, who grew up in the neighborhood, the Goddard Riverside Community Center worked with the 24th Police Precinct to engage neighborhood youths in activities aimed at reducing tensions between the "downtown group" on West 85th to West 96th Streets and the "uptown group" north of West 96th Street that had sometimes resulted in injuries and deaths from knife stabbings.[4] As a teenager, Ithier was involved in trying "to stop the fighting and push things in a more positive direction." The first movie shown on the empty lot, *Planet of the Apes,* provided not only free entertainment but an opportunity for people to gather on neutral ground. The event was repeated the following week.

The softball players were not part of any community group or political movement. They did not participate in tenants' associations or student protests, nor were they students or intellectuals whose activism began on college campuses. Several were armed services veterans; one worked in an automobile factory and another at a steel plant; others were unemployed laborers. The sole Dominican in the group, Marine Corps veteran Federico Lora, had enrolled in an architectural program at Pratt Institute upon returning from his tour of duty in Vietnam. The friends had not discussed politics and had no political aspirations. But when a tenant protest movement dubbed Operation Move-In

erupted in their neighborhood, they spontaneously joined in, embracing the cause of tenant empowerment as their own. Given the deplorable conditions their own families had endured since migrating to New York, they saw the tenants' movement as a struggle of "the people" against the "system." They squatted in a storefront on Columbus Avenue and West 88th Street and within several months became principal agitators for tenants' rights in their neighborhood. Joined first by companions and friends and gradually by other activists, they called themselves *El Comité,* and in the coming months they deepened their involvement in Operation Move-in as well as in campaigns for bilingual education and parent power in local schools and against police brutality in New York City.[5]

Adopting the symbolic dress of black berets worn by other young militants of their time, they were often mistaken for the Young Lords in those early days. Only a year earlier, the Young Lords had formed across town in El Barrio (Manhattan's East Harlem). Although the two groups shared similar beliefs, El Comité chose to remain separate from the Young Lords and the others, and distinguished itself as a distinct political force in several neighborhoods and worksites and through the pages of its first biweekly newspaper, *Unidad Latina.*

This chapter locates the origins of El Comité in the conditions of inequality and discrimination in New York in the 1960s and '70s and the political movements of the period that influenced many young Puerto Ricans to embrace political protest to address their grievances. The civil and human rights movements taking place throughout New York were plentiful and complex, and my sketch is not meant to be comprehensive. My aim is to create a sense of the historical moment and context in which Operation Move-In occurred and El Comité formed as a community organization.

Puerto Ricans and New York's Political Economy: 1960s–1970s

Although the U.S. economy boomed after World War II, by the early 1970s a combination of national and international conditions began to impede economic growth and threaten the rising standard of living that had been attained, especially by unionized workers in major industries. But economic prosperity at the height of post–World War II growth, as well as the hardships of the 1970s recession, were not equally shared by U.S. workers. In 1960, the median income of Puerto Rican and African American families was approximately 60 and 70 percent, respectively, that of whites; by 1970 the gap widened to 53 percent for Puerto Ricans and 69 percent for African Americans.[6] The average

come of Puerto Rican families dropped from 71 percent of the national erage income in 1960 to 59 percent in 1970. African American families did t fare much better.[7] Despite the 1960s "War on Poverty" and affirmative tion legislation, in 1974 one-third of all stateside Puerto Rican families lived low the poverty line.[8]

By the 1970s, the population in New York City had changed. During e Great Migration from the South in earlier decades, the African American pulation in the city increased by more than two-thirds. The Latino populan soared in the 1940s to 1960s as a result of mass migration from Puerto ico and, following the 1965 Amendments to the Immigration and National- Act, from the Dominican Republic and other Latin American countries smaller numbers. These increases brought the total population to nearly 8 illion by 1970, but the steep decline in the white population from the 1950s rough 1970s actually resulted in a 10 percent drop in the city's population 1980.[9] The gradual transition from a manufacturing to a service economy the United States affected minorities first in the form of economic contracon. Simultaneous with a massive outflow of one million whites, largely to the iburbs, in the 1960s and 1970s, New York City lost 500,000 jobs, mainly the manufacturing sector.[10]

In the 1960s alone, the percentage of the Puerto Rican workforce employed manufacturing dropped from 55 to 41 percent.[11] Although office jobs icreased slightly, the housing shortage encouraged some large corporations leave the city and discouraged others from locating their headquarters in Manhattan. Puerto Rican workers took what was available in the low-wage ervice sector, as waiters, kitchen help, porters, and hospital workers, and in ight industry sweatshops.

The Puerto Rican experience in New York's job market was similar to hat of African Americans. Both were excluded from many of the private secor jobs where unions had negotiated job security and career ladders through collective bargaining. This was especially true in the construction trades where white immigrant workers and their descendants, aided by union leaders, blocked union entry and opposed affirmative action programs by aligning with the Nixon administration against the more liberal policy proposals of Mayor John Lindsay.[12] In spite of Puerto Ricans' labor activism in New York going back as far as a century earlier, as Clara Rodriguez notes, "but it is fairly clear that with the exception of low-level jobs like garment workers and food services, most skilled or crafted unions [were] closed to Puerto Ricans."[13] To make matters worse, the encroaching fiscal crisis in New York City in the mid-1970s

threatened to disproportionately affect recently hired minorities in the public sector and those who depended most on public health care, education, and welfare programs. Throughout the 1970s, the unemployment rate for Puerto Ricans was twice the national average.[14]

Housing deterioration in neighborhoods with low-income residents had become critical by the late 1960s. Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, and African Americans lived in the worst of the city's public and nonpublic housing stock, even in the less-segregated neighborhoods of the West Side, and often paid higher-than-average rents. One housing study found that the

> . . . essential nature of the housing into which dark-skinned [*sic*] newcomers are funneled can be described very simply. The larger and poorer the family unit, the less living space it has, and the more dilapidated the housing. In one typically overcrowded sector of the West Side, for instance, 62 percent of the Negroes and 42 percent of the Spanish [*sic*] lived in one or two rooms. . . . [O]f those Spanish families in one- or two-room apartments, 68 percent had one or more children.[15]

Moreover, the federally subsidized, high-rise housing projects built in the 1950s under the direction of Robert Moses had failed the city's poor. Neighborhoods were devastated when sites were cleared for public housing. With few small businesses and low-rise buildings remaining, the areas surrounding the projects spiraled downward, effectively marginalizing thousands of city residents. Yet even though the projects were chronically undermaintained, thousands of applicants lingered for years on waiting lists for the chance to get out of a slumlord's building and into an apartment in the projects.

On Manhattan's West Side, many of the crumbling buildings had been constructed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as single-family homes and converted in the mid-1900s to rooming houses by absentee landlords. The city collaborated in the West Side's rapid increase in population density by approving, time after time, zoning changes that allowed absentee landlords to subdivide larger apartments into smaller units. Interspersed between these buildings were private tenements, public housing units, abandoned buildings, and some owner-occupied brownstones. The plumbing, heating, and electrical systems in hundreds of city- and privately owned buildings were antiquated. Residents were frustrated by frequent power outages triggered simply by turning on a toaster at the same time a fan recycled hot, stale air; many families lived

without functional kitchen and bathroom facilities. Epidemic rat infestation and lead poisoning threatened the health of children who were already underserved by resource-strained health providers in poor neighborhoods.

School conditions for most Puerto Rican and African American children were equally dismal by the time the first Puerto Rican, Joseph Monserrat, was appointed President of the New York City Board of Education in 1969. Puerto Rican and African American children attended the most densely populated schools. Despite the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court ruling and the persistent national myth that segregation was a southern problem, racial segregation in education worsened in the New York region in the 1960s (and is even more acute today).[16] In disproportionate numbers, minority students were tracked into special education programs as early as the first grade and, if they did not drop out, ended up in vocational rather than academic high schools. Though Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 and Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 provided federal funds to schools with large numbers of children who were poor and/or not fluent in English, the children needing those resources most did not benefit because the funds were often used to provide regular instructional services financed by local funds in other schools. According to School Superintendent Monserrat, "Puerto Ricans were thought of not as people but as 'the Puerto Rican problem,' as welfare recipients"; and students whose primary language was other than English were "barred from meaningful participation in education programs."[17] Between 1960 and 1970, the high school dropout rate hovered around 30 percent for Puerto Rican students and 25 percent for African Americans, while it remained under 10 percent for whites.[18]

African Americans made greater inroads than Puerto Ricans into the public sector as civil servants, but Blacks and Latino/as were the first and worst hit by the fiscal crisis of the 1970s. They paid the highest rents for the worst housing and were stuck either in the poorest schools or in districts controlled by entrenched elites that refused to fairly allocate resources, reform curricula, or share power on community boards.

Political Protest in New York in the 1960s

Political protest in New York City in the 1960s was, in broad terms, structurally conditioned by the contradictions engendered by national economic expansion and the capital outflows from inner cities to outlying suburbs: on the one hand, economic growth, rising incomes, and low unemployment for some sectors;

on the other hand, embedded poverty, poor services, high unemployment, and police repression for others, predominantly minorities. Although in the early to mid-1960s, especially after the murder of Malcolm X, the center of the Civil Rights Movement was in the South, Black and Puerto Rican activists formed alliances in New York based on shared grievances to protest the conditions in their communities, advocate for workers' rights, and demand access to and more inclusive curricula at private and public universities.[19] The Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) remained active in Harlem and Brooklyn and, among other things, raised the profile of police brutality against minority youth. When a Black youth was killed by an off-duty officer in 1964, the NYPD arrested CORE's leaders at a protest rally in Harlem. Five nights of riots followed the arrests, during which 15 Blacks were shot by police (one fatally) and 116 people were injured.[20] For the next few years, spontaneous and organized rallies in several communities responded to incidents of police brutality.[21] CORE was also instrumental in uniting Black and Latino parents in the Ocean Hill section of Brooklyn to demand greater community input into their children's education. As Frederick Douglass Opie describes it, the battle "was part of a nationwide movement by blacks and Latinos to reform school curricula, introduce black history, boost black and Latino/a parent participation, and win greater control for local communities over the operations their school districts."[22] The struggles spread to the Bronx and Manhattan later in the 1960s and early 1970s.[23]

The first few years of the 1960s were also known for tenant rent strikes. Tenant advocates and community groups such as Mobilization for Youth, CORE, Harlem Tenants' Council, Metropolitan Council on Housing, University Settlement, and *Puertorriqueños Unidos* distributed information on tenants' rights and led or supported rent strikes throughout the city. Although strikes were frequent, tenant militancy was difficult to sustain. Tenant actions resulted in few reforms and did not stop the spread of slums or significantly increase the supply of desirable public housing. By the late 1960s, tenant councils and advocates wanted to explore more aggressive solutions to the escalating housing crisis.

This was also a period of heightened labor activism, especially among health care and municipal workers. In the health care sector where Blacks and Latinos formed about 80 percent of the workforce, workers went on strike on several occasions in the early 1960s until they won recognition of union representation by Local 1199 of the Service Employees International Union.[24] On January 1, 1966, the first day of Mayor Lindsay's tenure, the Transit Workers' Union and Amalgamated Transit Union began a twelve-day strike for higher wages and better work environments. In some instances, job actions by municipal

unions exposed a growing rift between white union members and minorities interested in job access and education reform. The strike of the United Federation of Teachers in 1968 drew a clear line of hostility between the union on one side and the parents and other activists in minority-dominant districts on the other side. Black, Asian, and Puerto Rican parents wanted Board of Education power decentralized into local community school boards in order to have greater control over educational policy and advocate for improvements in their local schools.

Indeed, by the late 1960s and early 1970s, the political environment in New York City was volatile. The writings of Malcolm X, the southern-based Civil Rights Movement, the ideas of affirmative action, and the emerging Black Panthers' platform of community control inspired collective action in communities of color. These powerful influences coincided with students demanding open admissions to the City University system, insisting on the incorporation of Puerto Rican and Black Studies programs, and protesting the Vietnam War. City government and especially the New York City School Board became alarmed when community activists from Harlem and the Upper West Side joined forces with Columbia University students to protest the war and to denounce Columbia's proposal for a new gymnasium in Morningside Park. In April 1968, police forcibly and violently removed hundreds of students from the buildings they had taken over on campus.[25] Expressing concern for "escalating rebellion" among "radical fringes" in the schools, the School Board directed teachers to attend workshops on how to control unrest, walkouts, and school takeovers.[26] Internal discussions between the Board and the High School Principals' Association focused on developing strategies to "isolate militants."[27] Fearing youth reactions, New York City schools were shut down the day after four student anti-war protesters were killed by the Ohio National Guard at Kent State University in May 1970. Tensions heightened around the city when, eleven days later, state police killed two students and injured others at Jackson State, Mississippi.

Responding to the pressures from community activists, in 1967 Mayor Lindsay convened a conference of Puerto Rican community groups, asking for recommendations for improving living conditions in Puerto Rican neighborhoods. Despite several proposals made by the conference participants, the Lindsay Administration pursued no reforms in housing, sanitation conditions, education, or other services.[28] Frustrated with routine political avenues and skeptical of the mayor's avowed commitment to progressive policy measures, the newly-formed Young Lords felt compelled to act. By their own accounts, the "Garbage Offensive" of 1969 was designed to show local residents that

bold action that disrupted business as usual was needed to force the city to act on just demands.[29] As Miguel Melendez recounted:

> [A]rmed with large brooms, the Lords and some volunteers swept the street and stockpiled large quantities of garbage. [But] . . . the trucks of the Department of Sanitation did not come. When at last they did, half the garbage was left scattered all over the area. . . . [W]e started to sweep the garbage into the streets, particularly around the bus stops and the center of Second and Third Avenues, near 106th, 111th, 116th, and 118th Streets. . . . [T]he garbage formed a five-foot-high wall across the six lanes of Third Avenue, causing an unexpected traffic jam. Some drivers cursed and screamed at the piles of garbage and at us. Others nodded their heads and blew the horns of their cars in admiration of this never-before-seen strategy in ghetto politics. The only choice we had was confrontational politics. . . . The torching of the accrued garbage offensive was about to take place. . . . Every single Young Lord threw a match."[30]

Through the media attention garnered by this and similarly disruptive actions over the next two years, the Young Lords dramatically raised the profile of Puerto Rican grievances in New York City.[31] No doubt, their militancy influenced many activists just around the time a revitalized housing movement on the West Side chose squatting as its strategy for confronting the city and private slumlords. Although the Young Lords did not participate directly in the Squatters Movement, their actions on the East Side emboldened others and escalated the growing awareness, especially among Puerto Ricans, that contentious protest effectively commanded the attention of the city as well as the media, forcing confrontation on grievances otherwise ignored.

Urban "Renewal" or Urban "Removal"?

Following World War II, the demand for a federal response to housing shortages and urban decay made by a broad coalition of progressive political forces and organized labor led to the passage of the Housing Act of 1949, which stated that every American deserves a "decent home and a suitable living environment."[32] However, the implementation of the Act, under Title I, proved controversial in the nation's cities as federal funds were used mainly for "slum clearance."[33]

Whereas the earliest projects conceived under the 1949 legislation entailed complete neighborhood demolition and new construction, federal legislation in 1954 expanded federal housing support to include urban renewal projects that combined demolition and new construction with neighborhood preservation and renovation. New York's mayor, Robert Wagner, Jr., established the Urban Renewal Board to oversee a pilot project in the West Side Urban Renewal Area (WSURA) that ran from West 87th to West 97th Streets between Central Park West and Amsterdam Avenue.[34]

As approved in 1959, the project was to build 7,800 low- and high-rise, public and private housing units, of which 1,000 (about 13 percent) would be reserved for low-income; 4,200 (about 54 percent) for middle-income; and 2,600 (about 33 percent) for upper-income residents. The plan was a compromise between the Urban Renewal Board and the Strycker's Bay Neighborhood Council, which represented seventeen tenant and neighborhood groups in the WSURA and had negotiated an increase in the number of units earmarked for low- and middle-income residents. However, a few years later, in 1962, the Puerto Rican Citizens' Housing Committee, comprised of five Puerto Ricans who worked in city agencies and formed to study the impact of the plan on Puerto Rican residents, concluded that no less than 30 percent of the 7,800 housing units (2,340 units) should be allocated to low-income occupants and that minimal demolition and relocation of area residents should occur. Although the Committee was not a grassroots organization with representatives from affected neighborhoods, its position was widely publicized by local newspapers and tenant advocates. Strycker's Bay Neighborhood Council, from the West Side, endorsed the position of the Puerto Rican Citizens' Housing Committee and urged the city to reserve 30 percent of new units for low-income families, minimize neighborhood disruption from new construction, and commit to rehabilitating existing housing for working-class residents. These demands became the goals of the housing movement in the ensuing years.

By the time Mayor Lindsay took office in 1966, the city had acquired dozens of two-story buildings and tenements whose landlords preferred to abandon the properties rather than make city-mandated repairs.[35] But the WSURA plan contained no provision to renovate salvageable abandoned buildings for tenants living in inferior housing.[36] Instead, the plan envisioned redevelopment only through the demolition of thousands of housing units, the building of mostly high-rise, subsidized apartments, and tax incentives for banks and private investors to construct market-rate housing. Rather than admitting that low-income residents would not have access to the new housing, the city promised that families removed from selected sites for the duration of repairs would be welcomed back to their neighborhoods.

The central premise of "urban renewal" was that new and improved housing would be occupied by no more than 30 percent low-income families paying income-adjusted rents, mixed with a majority of upper- and middle-income families, which would stabilize communities and ensure long-term prosperity. Everyone would benefit: the city's deals with private developers would stimulate construction and real estate investment; housing would be upgraded for low-income residents and made more attractive to middle- and upper-income families. The influx of investment funds and class integration would invigorate the local economy. But West Side residents' prior experience with Title I projects cast doubt that the city would honor its commitment to reserve even 30 percent of new housing for low-income residents. Earlier in the decade, 4,000 residential units had been demolished from West 97th to West 100th Streets, between Central Park West and Amsterdam Avenue (the Park West Village Development); and despite promises to the contrary, the majority of displaced residents could not afford the rents in the newly constructed buildings. Urban scholar Joseph Lyford predicted the outcome:

> The urban renewal area undergoes a nervous as well as a physical breakdown. . . . In the midst of the collapse, the Puerto Ricans and Negroes of the side streets and the Irish in the tenements on Columbus and Amsterdam Avenues drop into an invisible stream of immigrants to some other place inside or outside the city. Although nearly three-quarters of the people in the [urban renewal] Area questioned about their plans indicated they wanted to remain on the West Side, most of the Negroes and Puerto Ricans will not be able to afford to live in the new community or qualify for the limited public housing. The ineligibles will move again and again, the records on them will be lost, and they will become mired in a gray, deteriorating area in another borough with neither the will nor the energy to retrace their steps. The unemployed Negroes and Puerto Ricans leaving the area are the people always found in neighborhoods being torn down, rehabilitated, or renewed for someone else."[37]

The city's dismal record of dislocation and broken promises was evidenced as well by the earlier Lincoln Center renewal project, in the area that stretched from West 62nd Street to West 67th Street between Amsterdam and Sixth Avenues where redevelopment was primarily nonresidential and uprooted families could not return.[38] When asked to explain the failed promise, the city insisted that all known, eligible residents were given the opportunity to apply for the new housing if they could afford the rent—the operative principles

being "eligibility" and "affordability." The federal Housing and Urban Development Act of 1970 redefined subsidy guidelines by increasing the percentage of income public-housing tenants were required to pay, which together with higher-than-expected rents kept families who relied on Section 8 out of the new housing developments.[39] In the West Side and Morningside Heights, where many buildings were slated for demolition, the city had ignored tenants' grievances or, at best, assigned insufficient numbers of inspectors to issue fines (which tenant advocates considered too low to be effective) to unresponsive slumlords. "Urban removal," as it was dubbed by local activists, increased racial and class segregation rather than integration by forcing long-time tenants out of salvageable buildings and relocating them to inferior housing in the outer boroughs. Those who remained in overcrowded and often unsafe tenements gleaned no hope from subsequent redevelopment plans.

Adding to the disillusionment with "urban removal" was the growing appearance of collusion between private developers and Puerto Rican political or antipoverty agency leaders, particularly Herman Badillo, Ramón Velez, and Amy Betances, who denied the deleterious impact of urban renewal on low-income communities.[40] In 1962 Badillo was appointed commissioner of the newly formed Department of Housing Relocation. As commissioner until 1965 and Bronx Borough President from 1965 to 1970, Badillo worked with real estate developers on an agenda of urban revitalization that vulnerable residents of Manhattan viewed as gentrification:

> As part of an overall plan by the government to keep both industry and the professional, administrative and managerial classes in the City, certain communities in Manhattan were selected to undergo a complete structural overhaul, and racial and class transformation. . . . Families were uprooted to make way for communities designed to attract professionals. . . . [L]ess than 10 percent [of uprooted families] were "granted" their rights to a home in the newly built apartments. . . . Badillo operated not in defense of working class interests, but in defense of large corporations who [did not want to] lose their skilled employees to suburban jobs.[41]

Community activist Dorothy Pitman Hughes commented in the documentary film *Break and Enter* (*Rompiendo Puertas*) that working-class residents paid in taxes and blood for the war in Vietnam and for a national space exploration program while the city colluded behind their backs with private investors and speculators.[42]

Operation Move-In

The Squatters Movement in Manhattan's Upper West Side and Morningside Heights erupted in the spring of 1970 when groups of residents seized possession of vacant buildings. Although the initial move-ins were more spontaneous than part of a deliberate strategy of an organized movement, anger and frustration over the city's housing plan had been swelling for some months. Institutional political processes had produced no results. When a young boy, Jimmy Santos, died from carbon monoxide poisoning in a first-floor apartment on West 106th Street, anger exploded and protests escalated. On the evening following the street funeral march held for the child, local antipoverty and tenant advocate groups helped several dozen families break into nine sealed buildings designated for demolition on and around Columbus Avenue and the West 80s in the WSURA. While squatters moved at night with crowbars to peel off the seals covering doors and windows, supporters cheered on the streets as furniture was moved with ropes through windows from the Santos residence into one of the closed buildings.[43]

Figure 2.1. Operation Move-In Rally, 1971 *(also cover photo)*. (Máximo Colón, photographer)

For years, tenants and advocates had pleaded with the city to alter its urban renewal plan. Now, residents fed up with the city's inattention to their concerns forced negotiations by occupying buildings slated for demolition or abandoned. As word of the action spread that month and the next, more families—mostly Puerto Rican, Dominican, and African American—joined the movement. Local residents, together with veteran tenant and community agencies, mobilized support for the defiant actions. The veteran organizations in the area, including Community Action, Inc., the Mid-West Side Community Corp., and several churches, provided essential material and moral support to the squatters. Former tenant advocate Tom Gogan recalled the political atmosphere:

> There was documentation of the vast amount of dislocation that had already occurred in that neighborhood and the reality that very few people had actually been able to return, despite all the struggle. That became the theme—that the city made these promises and we're going to hold them to it. So, squatting was a logical development at a certain point, especially given the tenor of the times. The students were taking over the campuses in protest of the invasion of Cambodia; Jackson State and Kent State hit—spring of 1970. The country was in ferment. Only a year and a half earlier we had the Columbia student takeovers and other student protests. Taking these buildings was almost the natural thing to do.[44]

Initially, the city threatened the squatters with forced eviction and sent squads of maintenance workers to apartments and buildings not yet occupied to break fixtures, remove stoves, refrigerators, and sinks, and wreck electrical wiring in an effort to deter additional move-ins.[45] But the squatters refused to vacate the apartments. Two weeks after the initial occupations, the city reversed course, saying the squatters would be allowed to stay temporarily, but no further actions would be tolerated. New locks were installed, and some fixtures were replaced. Operation Move-In, however, was in full swing.

In June 1970 the softball players who organized Friday night movies at the local sandlot joined the squatters by breaking the lock and prying open the door of a vacant storefront. Marine veteran Federico Lora was among the crew:

> I remember one of you guys came up with the idea of a storefront, because Operation Move-In was already functioning. They had taken over apartments. And we knew that the storefront on Columbus and West 88th Street was empty. We moved in on a weekend and began to clean it up. (Lora)[46]

Figure 2.2. El Comité's Office, Columbus Ave. and W. 88th St., 1971. (Máximo Colón, photographer)

From the moment they occupied the storefront, neighborhood residents stopped in to meet the new group. Luis Ithier, for example, was curious:

> The day they broke into the storefront, I was coming from Under the Stairs [a local bar]. I'm hearing this commotion in front of the storefront. I knew all these guys. I thought it was going to be something like a social club. Many of the other guys thought so too, to be quite honest. (Ithier)[47]

As a public sector union employee, Ithier was one of the few original members of El Comité who had prior political experience: "I was already involved with Congressman Ryan," he explained, "and campaigned for JFK too."[48]

The ballplayers who squatted at 577 Columbus Avenue had no clear political agenda other than a vague idea that "the people" were justified in taking direct action against the political establishment to control their own destiny.[49] They had been touched by the bravery of the families confronting the tactical police squads sent by the city when a building was taken and went as a group to each site to help defend the occupations. Carmen Martell recalled:

> Nobody took over the storefront so that we could become a political organization. People were squatting. There was a lot of territory open to take. . . . We ourselves, our families, were affected by the housing situation and by Operation Move-In. Once we took the storefront as squatters ourselves, we became part of that movement.[50]

Within several weeks of opening, thirty or more individuals began meeting daily at the storefront to strategize about how to sustain the "people's" movement. Although many in the group were English-dominant or bilingual, choosing a name in Spanish reflected their strong cultural affinity and national identity. Who the "people" were seemed clear: the poor, struggling families—their own families—who were mainly Latino and African American.[51] Not included in their view, national identity notwithstanding, were the few Puerto Ricans in city government who they believed had betrayed the community by advocating the interests of banks and real estate speculators.

While many individuals and groups in Operation Move-In were from the Upper West Side, others were not. El Comité wanted to ensure that families who had already been moved out of the neighborhood or expected to be removed would have priority access to apartments in buildings that were taken over as well as to new public housing. Pedro Rentas explained:

> We went to a meeting between Operation Move-In and Strycker's Bay. The thing was that people from the West Side, people we knew, had been moved out. They were sent to the Bronx, Long Island, wherever. And some of the people coming in had nothing to do with the West Side. The West Side was Puerto Rican, Irish, and a lot of Russians. In fact, the building in front of El Comité was the old Russian Embassy. So, Federico spoke at that meeting. And we asked, 'who guarantees that whoever gets an apartment in these spaces is from here?' We started getting apartments for the people who used to live here. We brought them back.[52]

The influence El Comité swiftly gained among veteran activists and local residents can likely be attributed to its neighborhood roots and outspoken insistence that the Squatters Movement should benefit local residents before newcomers. The members and their families lived in West Side tenements and projects. Some had children who attended local schools. They tended to be older than the students from Columbia University and the Young Lords from the other side of town (East Harlem) and matured, in some cases, by their

military experience. Though some were not Spanish dominant, they still communicated easily in Spanish and shared cultural bonds with other Puerto Rican and Dominican residents. Whites in the movement, even if tenant advocates, did not have similar credibility, especially if they did not live in the neighborhood or had moved to New York only recently.

In Federico Lora, both El Comité and the movement found a charismatic and, before long, respected leader. Ana Juarbe, a long-time resident of the West Side and secretary at Columbia University when she became involved with the squatters, recalled her first impression of El Comité:

> We used to have women's groups as squatters on W. 111th Street. . . . I was in awe of these articulate, strong, intelligent, leaders. . . . The way they carried themselves. . . . I really wasn't political . . . but, my goodness, all these Latinos were like a breath of fresh air. They were so untraditional; they weren't ghetto. When there were takeovers, all kinds of people would come on the scene. I remember asking, 'who are these people?' That's the first time I saw the people from El Comité.[53]

Motivated by the desire to protect the interests of those who had been displaced or awaited eviction, El Comité became a leading force within Operation Move-In:

> We decided we wanted to confront the housing situation in a more organized fashion . . . [W]e started planning which buildings should be taken over, which families should go here or there. We became more organized rather than spontaneous. (Martell)[54]

One scholar's account of tenant movement history in New York City makes exactly that point about the West Side squatters:

> Ad hoc move-ins occurred on West 15th Street in Greenwich Village [*sic*] and on 111th and 122nd Streets. . . . But squatting became more systematic on West 87th Street and along Columbus Avenue, where buildings awaited luxury conversion or demolition for middle-income high rises as part of the West Side Urban Renewal. At night, blacks and Puerto Ricans, prying open boarded-up entrances and rigging makeshift living arrangements, presented the city with a fait accompli—either recognize their "ownership" or evict whole

> families in front of press photographers. Eventually, the Columbus Avenue Operation Move-In claimed one hundred participating families . . . (and) were supported by elaborate networks . . .[55]

Actually, the West Side squatters grew to over two hundred families on the night of July 25, 1970, when fifty-four families, including one hundred twenty children, occupied two privately owned buildings earmarked for demolition on Amsterdam Avenue and West 112th Street in Morningside Heights.[56] The two buildings and four others were scheduled for demolition to make way for a luxury nursing home to be built by Morningside, Inc., a nonprofit corporation affiliated with the Cathedral of St. John the Divine.[57] Six hundred residents had already been evicted from the six buildings. Operation Move-In, of which El Comité was now a part, provided the organizers of the action with a waiting list of families living in overcrowded and unsafe conditions and interested in squatting. Organizers went door-to-door visiting families in the Manhattan Valley neighborhood to mobilize those willing to move into the buildings. The morning following the takeover, the squatters and supporters greeted churchgoers with news of the occupation. Though St. John the Divine, sitting directly across from the buildings, officially denounced the occupation at the Sunday service, out of the church walked "Episcopalians for the Poor," pledging their support for the action.[58]

For the next few weeks, students in the Urban Brigade, mainly Latinos from Columbia University and Barnard College, and community activists met with squatters in the occupied buildings and mobilized support for them throughout the West Side. Forty-seven community organizations citywide endorsed the actions.[59] On the Sunday morning a week after the occupation, Father David García, a radical priest from the Lower East Side, led a sidewalk Mass with squatters and supporters. Tom Gogan offered contextual insight:

> Lindsay would not move against those takeovers because of the community support. Do you think he would have hesitated if the community opposed this? No way. How would that have looked to the constituents he wanted to appeal to? It was a very strong, very liberal area, except for the newcomers. Don't forget, Congressman William Fitts Ryan represented the district; Bella Abzug became Congresswoman in 1971; there were huge anti-war rallies there in the late 60s. When poor people, working class people, people of color took direct action, a lot of people said, "Yeah, ok, we have to support them." This was not the Upper East Side.[60]

For nearly ten years after the takeovers, Morningside, Inc. tried to repossess the two occupied buildings through the courts, until Judge Bruce Wright threw the case out in 1979 and eventually turned the buildings over to the city.[61] The squatters obtained leases (and eventually deeds of ownership) from the city to apartments in those two buildings.

In the remaining months of 1970 and well into 1971, El Comité's members attended meetings and rallies at St. Gregory's Church where Federico Lora often spoke. They joined door-to-door leafleting to rally residents to resist displacement. Manuel Ortiz, also in El Comité, led the occupation of a building on West 100th Street and West End Avenue.[62] At every public opportunity, activists confronted Betances, Badillo, and other city planners about the neglect of local residents. Badillo was jeered by crowds as "otro pillo" (another thief). When pressed to produce the list of families that had been moved from the West Side to the South Bronx, Badillo claimed the list had been misplaced or lost.[63] In response, on a fall afternoon in 1970, El Comité members informed the police precincts on West 82nd Street and West100th Street that there would be a march to the Urban Renewal Office located directly across from their Columbus Avenue storefront. While several hundred people waited outside, spokespersons entered the office and asked the site manager to request a meeting with Badillo on their behalf. When Badillo refused to meet, El Comité escalated the confrontation by disrupting the flow of commercial traffic. On a Friday in October at 4:30 p.m., the time when food delivery trucks came over the Triboro (now RFK) Bridge and down Columbus Avenue, protesters blocked the streets to prevent the trucks from passing. The action was repeated for several consecutive weeks, without police intervention; but Badillo never met with the protesters. In order to stop further demolitions planned for the Mitchell-Lama development, the movement stepped up the scale of building occupations by moving more families into vacant apartments and targeting the Mitchell-Lama development sites.

The Mitchell-Lama program, begun in the 1950s, provided city and state mortgage, tax, and rent subsidies to developers who agreed to rent units to moderate-income earners. As in the Lincoln Center area, most of the families removed from the West Side to make way for these high-rise buildings were low-income families and could not expect to afford the new apartments. Occupancy rules for the one- and two-bedroom apartments limited the number of persons per apartment, thereby further disqualifying many families. Operation Move-In wanted the city's assurance that it would support the position of Strycker's Bay and the Puerto Rican Citizens' Housing Committee by reserving at least 30 percent of the Mitchell-Lama units for low-income residents

previously removed or to be removed to make way for the development. "Site 30" of the Mitchell-Lama sites, on the west side of Columbus Avenue and West 90th Street, was chosen for the takeover.

Directly across the street, on the east side of Columbus Avenue and West 90th Street, squatters who had previously entered a completed, but still vacant, Mitchell-Lama building known as Site 20 were removed by police after several weeks. Occupancy by accepted Mitchell-Lama applicants was delayed six months until March 1971 because of the takeover. One of the original Mitchell-Lama residents, Barbra Minch, recollected that the new residents were split in their reaction to the squatters' actions.[64] When the squatters at Site 30 sought support from the new renters in Site 20, the residents' meeting held simply to decide whether to hear the squatters' position erupted into a physical fight between supporters and opponents.

It was not the first time conflicts arose between residents excluded from development plans and newcomers who benefited from the city-subsidized apartments built for urban renewal. But when the occupation of Site 30 elicited an agreement from the city that 30 percent of Mitchell-Lama units still to be built would be guaranteed to low-income families, it seemed that the squatters had won another round. The city promised to construct an additional 946 low-income and 1,117 middle-income units in the WSURA but also warned that future squatters would be evicted from vacant buildings.[65] Carmen Martell of El Comité, who still resides in (what was then) a Mitchell-Lama apartment, summed up the success of the Squatters Movement:

> We were able to get many families into the buildings we took over on 87th Street, many of whom are still there. We stopped demolition for Mitchell-Lama on Site 30 until the city agreed to meet the quota that 30 percent of all units would be reserved for low-income applicants.[66]

Despite its verbal agreement, however, the city managed to reduce the proportion of low-income occupancy in Mitchell-Lama residences to well below the promised quota. According to Minch, one of the city's manipulations was to seek and accept applicants (such as law students) whose long-term projected income far exceeded low-income eligibility guidelines. Another tactic, according to Eulogio Ortiz and Maria Collado, was setting eligibility rules that precluded most displaced residents from returning to the neighborhood.[67] For example, a family of seven exceeded the occupancy limit for most of the new units. On the other end, a single person qualified only for the few studios and not for

one-bedroom apartments. Also, the city played carrot-and-stick. They conceded more favorable terms for the Mitchell-Lama site and transferred control or ownership of some buildings to the squatters. Dozens of families were permitted to renovate, and rents remained stabilized. Many squatters, however, were taken out by city police. In November 1970, thirty individuals (including Pedro Rentas of El Comité) were removed from a building on West 87th Street and arrested by fifty members of the Tactical Patrol Force. The city said the squatters violated the agreement that no more families would move into buildings earmarked for demolition.[68] But demonstrators at the site maintained that the building had not been sealed by the city because one old tenant remained and, therefore, squatters had not violated the agreement.

The urban renewal plan created schisms not only in the Upper West Side but throughout the city between those who believed the plan's opponents were justified and those who detested them. *New York Times* journalist David Shipler reported the assessment of an unidentified representative of the real estate industry and local landlord: Puerto Ricans are not completely civilized—don't quote me—how can a landlord have those people?"[69] The "brownstoners" in the Committee of Neighbors to Insure a Normal Urban Environment (CONTINUE), many of whom were new owner-renovators and middle- and upper-income professionals, viewed the Squatters Movement as a threat that would reduce the area to "a racially segregated slum."[70] CONTINUE gained the attention of Deputy Mayor Richard Aurelio, Housing and Development Administrator Albert Walsh, and Relocation Commissioner Earl Rawlins by vowing to oppose any urban renewal plans that included subsidized housing for the poor. In its lawsuit to stop subsidized housing altogether, CONTINUE cited the "tipping" theory that too many poor people of color would exacerbate white flight and disinvestments. Though the lawsuit eventually failed, CONTINUE delayed and ultimately discouraged the city from building further publicly subsidized housing on the West Side. The luxury rental building built on the former Site 30 in the 1980s reduced to 20 percent the total number of units set aside for "low- to moderate-income residents . . . 'self-subsidized' by the rents from the rest of the building. . . ."[71]

Ironically, in the long-run, segregation prevailed, though not the type feared by CONTINUE. The city's concessions to the Squatters Movement gave activists partial but short-lived victories, effectively demobilizing the movement and paving the way for the gradual, wholesale gentrification of the West Side. In the subsequent decades of the 1980s and '90s, the collaboration between real estate developers, banks, and city agencies ultimately succeeded in the massive displacement of working class residents and virtually eliminated

affordable housing on the Upper West Side. In the wake of an institutionalized plan that catered to private developers and ignored the housing needs of the working class in New York City, segregation in the form of class and racial gentrification is evident today not only throughout the West Side but in most of Manhattan and significant parts of Brooklyn and Queens.

Still, the power potential and short-term achievements of Operation Move-In lay in the risks taken by men and women, some quite young, who led

Figure 2.3. Children of Operation Move-In, 1971. (Máximo Colón, photographer)

their own parents and siblings by the hand through dark hallways in the night, who for the moment refused to allow the city's political and economic rulers to control their destiny. Activists' ability to expand the movement beyond the initial takeovers was enhanced by two factors. First, the prior Lincoln Center development had already exposed the devastating impact of urban renewal and damaged the credibility of political elites who extolled the virtues of the plan as win-win. Second, the liberal mayoral administration vacillated on using police force exclusively in response to the occupations.

The movement also benefited from the broad support of advocacy organizations and influential allies. As in prior political movements, networking among potential mainstream allies increased the movement's exposure and galvanized support. Future Manhattan Borough President Ruth Messinger, State Assemblyman Albert Blumenthal, and State Senator Manfred Ohrenstein all publicly denounced the city's urban renewal plans. Frequently shouting "power to the people," movement participants were energized as well by the alliances made with students, youth activists, and organizations around the city.[72] Occupied buildings were designated as "liberated zones." The most successful were those that were cleaned out and set up with a community kitchen to accommodate people in apartments with no refrigerators or sinks because of the city rip-outs.[73]

Grassroots organizations such as El Comité and advocates such as Strycker's Bay Neighborhood Council did not initiate the movement. It was widely recognized, though, according to former member Nancy Colón, that "El Comité's impact on advancing a housing justice agenda was significant. For a time, they got poor, working people back into the community."[74] Former members of El Comité, friends, and veterans of Operation Move-In still reside in the Upper West Side and Morningside Heights urban renewal areas, representing the last stronghold of subsidized renters or co-op owners of city-transferred properties in the area. Among the 19,000 working-class families displaced by "urban removal" in Manhattan in the 1960s and 1970s were activists who continued to struggle against gentrification and for decent health care and education in areas such as Williamsburg and the South Bronx, the latter of which remains one of the poorest urban regions in the United States.[75]

Spontaneous to Conscious Political Activism

Today's severely gentrified housing environment in Manhattan obscures the history of resistance by Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, African Americans, as well as low-income whites and tenant advocates, to New York's "urban renewal"

designs. For years prior to 1970, tenants and their advocates in the Lincoln Center and Upper West Side areas urged the city to stop displacing families under the guise of "urban renewal" and devise a plan instead to improve slum housing conditions. Only when hundreds of families on the West Side defied the city and private property owners by squatting in vacant buildings and cultivated the support of various social sectors were limited concessions achieved. Operation Move-In demonstrated the partial effectiveness of sustained, organized protests that used disruptive tactics, persuasive mobilizing strategies, and broad alliances to assert community-based power and force concessions from elites.

El Comité's formation was as an outgrowth of the Squatters Movement. The organization developed organically among predominantly working-class Puerto Rican activists, rather than as a product of *a priori* ideology. El Comité's early political development was conditioned by both the negative elite responses to the demand for quality, affordable housing and the minor victories achieved through spontaneous and planned resistance. The reaction of city government to the Squatters Movement reinforced their perception that elected and appointed officials, Puerto Rican or not, did not represent their communities and that the excluded and powerless would have to represent themselves. El Comité's "anti-system" perspective and claim that decent housing was a democratic right resonated among Latinos and others whose distrust of elites was rooted in a history of broken promises, economic hardship, and social and political marginalization.

Clearly, there have been few sustained victories for low- to moderate-income tenants in Manhattan. Operation Move-In subsided as the police became more aggressive and opportunities to expand the movement diminished. Ultimately, the city was not held accountable for deceiving displaced families with the promise that they would be able to return to their neighborhood to live in decent housing. By the time luxury housing was constructed on Site 30 of the West Side Urban Renewal Area, many of the organizations and activists of Operation Move-In had dissipated and individuals dispersed. While the movement's successes were limited, its impact on El Comité was far-reaching. The tenuous and partial nature of victory affirmed that grassroots activism can launch formidable challenges to oppressive conditions. As organizer Manuel Ortiz noted: "The struggle against urban renewal was never going to be won. But it created an urgent sense of need for community education and long-term organizing."[76]

In 1970 El Comité became recognized on the West Side as a principled group, with no hidden agenda or desire for acclaim, independent of elected leaders and antipoverty agencies that bought into institutional politics and

compromised community interests. The organization increased its contacts around the city, especially in the Lower East Side and South Bronx, and among students who supported the squatters. The most significant outcome of El Comité's early involvement in Operation Move-In was its collective evolution from spontaneous reactor to conscious political actor.